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Focusing on the 'Human' in HR

By Bill Leonard

Nikki Jackson never thought of a career in public service—until the governor of Kentucky called. In December 2007, when Gov. Steve Beshear appointed her secretary of his Personnel Cabinet, Jackson suddenly became his top human resource executive.

Never one to back down from a challenge, Jackson saw the post as a chance

to have a positive and lasting impact on thousands of employees and on every person who lives and works in Kentucky.

"It was a shock when I learned the governor was considering me for the job, and it was a great honor to be appointed," she recalls.

Although Jackson started her job in one of the nation's worst economies, she says the recession offers an opportunity to revamp the Kentucky government's HR function and develop an "engagement model" emphasizing the "human" in human resource management."

workforce now has about 1,000 fewer employees than when she signed on.

Officials opted not to fill open jobs, and the additional workload on individuals has become a top concern for Jackson, who has seen her own staff decrease almost 10 percent—from nearly 240 in 2007 to approximately 220 at the end of 2009. All commonwealth employees' pay has been essentially frozen for two years, while they are being called on to do more.

"One of the toughest problems that I face with this economy is how to reward staff for a job well done," she says. Meanwhile, Jackson and other top executives volunteered to cut their own pay by 10 percent.

Budget constraints have made development of an employee engagement model essential to ensure that the Kentucky government succeeds as an employer of choice, Jackson insists.

When she began working for Beshear, the HR function was based on an antiquated model focused on handling transactions and "creating policies and

Nikki Jackson

Education: 1998, certification in collective bargaining, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y.; 1995, J.D., University of Miami School of Law, Miami; 1992, Bachelor of Arts in journalism, Hampton University, Hampton, Va.

Current Job: 2007-present, secretary, Personnel Cabinet, Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Career: 2007, director of human resources, Norton Healthcare, Louisville, Ky. 2006-07, vice president, human resources, and general counsel, C.W. Johnson Xpress, Louisville. 2005-06, director, human resources, Automatic Data Processing, Louisville. 2003-05, owner, Nikki Jackson Human Resources Consulting, Louisville. 2002-03, senior decision support professional; 2001-03, HR policy and compliance operations; 2000-01, senior compliance specialist; 1999-2000, case management specialist; Philip Morris USA, Richmond, Va. 1998-99, affirmative action compliance manager; 1998, industrial relations and equal employment opportunity project manager; Georgia-Pacific Corp., Atlanta. 1995-97, labor and employment attorney, Mack Williams Haygood & McLean PA, Boca Raton, Fla.

Personal: Age 39; born in Jefferson City, Mo.; husband, Vince; two children.

Diversions: Writing, reading, traveling, community service, public speaking.

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Although Jackson started her job in one of the nation's worst economies, she says the recession offers an opportunity to revamp the Kentucky government's HR function.

And Kentucky has fared better than most other states: By law, furloughs and layoffs must be approved by the General Assembly, so Kentucky's HR professionals avoided them. However, the recession reduced agency budgets, prohibited new capital expenditures and reduced payrolls through attrition.

"We haven't come through this ordeal unscathed, and we're still learning to do more with less," Jackson says. The

procedures and then sending the policy edicts out."

In short, the Personnel Cabinet was administering HR policies in "a vacuum" with little input from the people affected most. Jackson set about reshaping HR.

"The goal is to develop a workforce that is more focused and engaged," she

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says. A key is injecting levity into the workplace. Jackson finds a direct correlation between having fun at work and improving productivity. "People who are happy at work tend to work harder, longer and with more enthusiasm," she says.

The Cabinet's mascot, a butterfly named MARTI, is an example of how Jackson and her staff "lighten up." MARTI is an acronym for Motivate others, Aspire to achieve, Realize your potential, Train at every opportunity and Implement what you learn. The staff now throws "Marti-Gras" parties to recognize their efforts and show support for the mascot's message.

"The Cabinet's staff has responded by taking pride in ownership in the policies and programs that we are trying to implement and push down to all levels," Jackson says.

She views her job as a continuous learning opportunity and delights in working and growing with others. Her love of learning from the experiences and knowledge of colleagues was cultivated while growing up on the campus of Hampton Institute, now Hampton University, in Hampton, Va. Her mother was chair of the English Department.

Jackson now realizes how her childhood instilled intellectual curiosity that serves her well in government. "My parents would have people like Maya Angelou as dinner guests," she says. "But when you're 11 years old, you really don't appreciate that type of experience."

Says Beshear: "Nikki Jackson has a tremendous responsibility as the chief of human resources for our 34,000 employees. She's energetic, highly intelligent and thrives under pressure. These are the reasons I called on her. In the toughest economy we've witnessed in a lifetime, Secretary Jackson continues to foster an environment of innovation and integrity, striving to make state government an employer-of-choice model for the commonwealth and the nation." ■